

## DESK STATEMENT

## The Environmental Working Group's (EWG) Report on Perchlorate

On July 16, 2001, the Environmental Working Group (EWG), a non-profit environmental research organization with offices in Washington DC and Oakland, CA, released a report on perchlorate entitled "Rocket Science - Perchlorate and the Toxic Legacy of the Cold War." Perchlorate is a primary component of solid rocket fuel. Because of improper disposal practices, it has become a noted contaminant in ground water and has resulted in the closing of drinking water wells in California.

The EWG report is critical of certain EPA assessment activities related to perchlorate, notably (1) the partnership with the Department of Defense (DoD) to fund studies to fill the data gaps and (2) the derivation of the 1998 risk estimate. In the 1997 Appropriations Bill, EPA was directed to work in partnership with DoD, the National Institute of Environmental Health Science (NIEHS), and other Federal and State agencies to assess perchlorate environmental contamination. The assessment was to examine the state of the science concerning health effects and ecological impacts and was to look at the need for additional research. A strict firewall has been maintained by the Agency with respect to interpretation of the data for the risk assessment. The only role of the DoD and associated contractors was to fund the studies and provide the data in an expedited fashion. The assessment has been strictly an EPA and NIEHS endeavor.

In its second area of criticism the EWG report seems to confuse risk estimate issues by referring interchangeably to (1) the provisional oral reference dose (RfD) from the 1998 perchlorate assessment external review draft, and (2) a regulatory maximum contaminant level (MCL). The EWG also made errors regarding the basis for the 1998 RfD derivation, including the choice of critical study, endpoint and rationale underlying application of uncertainty factors. The EWG has not been in communication with the EPA on any of its current assessment activities, but instead seems to presume an outcome based on the 1998 draft assessment. The EWG report ignores the fact that current Office of Research and Development guidance to EPA program offices and regions recommends action levels in the 4 to 18 parts per billion (ppb) range during the interim as new data are evaluated. Current EPA decision actions at two Superfund sites in California have used the current minimum detection limit (MDL) of 4 ppb as a guidance level. The Agency is interested in the report and is reviewing it in greater detail.

The ongoing process of developing a final perchlorate assessment continues. The conclusions of EPA's final perchlorate assessment will be an important component of the Congressionally-mandated perchlorate report to Congress. To that end, EPA held a peer review of an external draft risk characterization, including both a health and ecological assessment, in February 1999. This draft was based on the initial set of data developed via the partnership. Recommendations for additional studies were made at the peer review and the EPA is currently revising the draft risk based on the new data. The Agency expects to place the revised external peer document on the web for public comment in the late Fall of 2001. This public release will afford the EWG an opportunity to reevaluate its assertions in the light of the new assessment, together with other public stakeholders and the DoD. A second external peer review will be scheduled to follow the public review release. The final perchlorate assessment is expected in 2002.



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## LOCAL NEWS: The Sacramento Bee

# Pollutant in water goes unregulated

By Chris Bowman  
Bee Staff Writer  
(Published July 14, 2001)

Nearly 50 years after its discovery in Sacramento County drinking water supplies, a hazardous component of solid rocket fuel has found its way through the taps of an estimated 20 million residents in California, Nevada and Arizona.

Yet regulators say they are years away from establishing an enforceable drinking water standard deemed safe for the chemical, perchlorate.

Although the federal Environmental Protection Agency has proposed a standard, it has come under attack from at least one national environmental group as too lenient.

The Environmental Working Group, a nonprofit research organization promoting stricter pollution safeguards, contends in a soon-to-be-released report that the EPA overlooked the higher sensitivity that developing infants and fetuses have to perchlorate contamination.

The reasons for the regulatory void vary widely, from simple environmental naiveté of 1950s and '60s, to defense industry lobbying and scientific uncertainties about perchlorate's toxicity at the trace levels found in drinking water.

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But to many residents aware of the chemical's presence in their water, the time-consuming debates and studies aimed at setting a "safe" perchlorate level are preposterous.

"Why should any amount of rocket fuel be allowed in my drinking water?" asked Loretta Cooper, 58, who has decided to relocate because of the perchlorate contamination that has infiltrated several wells in Rancho Cordova.

Her home of 15 years is not far from the known source of contamination: the Sacramento County rocket building and testing site for Aerojet Corp., which disposed of rocket fuel waste underground for decades after its establishment in the early 1950s.

Cooper's question pops up wherever state and federal environmental regulators go to update communities about the progress of the health studies, the drinking-water monitoring and efforts to contain groundwater contamination, and whether perchlorate comes from rockets, gas stations or dry-cleaning plants.

"The answer they give us over and over again is that it's just not acceptable to have any amount of a contaminant in their drinking water," said Kevin Mayer, who manages several polluted Superfund sites in California and the Southwest for the EPA.

Last December, the outgoing EPA regional administrator, Felicia Marcus, raised the question herself in a Bee interview as she packed up her office overlooking San Francisco Bay.

Of all environmental health issues that bombarded her during her Clinton administration years, few seared her memory as much as the 1997 discovery of perchlorate in Lake Mead, the source for Las Vegas drinking water.

Perchlorate, a chemical salt manufactured mainly for rocket propulsion but also for fireworks and even auto air bags, doesn't break down in soil or water and bypasses conventional drinking water filtration systems.

EPA officials say the bulk of the estimated 20 million people affected by the chemical live in Los Angeles, San Diego and other Southern California cities that take some of their water from the Colorado River.

An estimated 1,000 pounds of perchlorate enters the river daily from a former perchlorate plant near Las Vegas, the EPA says.

In most cases, the level of perchlorate is not detectable.

Although the levels found in Nevada tap water were below those known to interfere with the thyroid gland and its production of hormones necessary for normal human development, Marcus knew the contamination would resonate in ways science does not capture.

"The emotional toxicity of rocket fuel in drinking water really got to me," she said.

Meeting the EPA's safety guideline of no more than 18 parts per billion of perchlorate in drinking water is not enough.

"If it stinks, goes boom or glows in the dark, you've got to do more than the minimum," Marcus said.

Cooper, who runs a home-based adoption matchmaking business, said she didn't buy the regulators' arguments a few years ago that the perchlorate levels found in several wells run by the Arden-Cordova Water District were well below levels known to cause harm.

She ordered bottled water delivered to her home regularly for \$46 a month.

"I use it for everything except washing clothes, and, unfortunately, to take a bath," she said.

Neighboring retirees Greg and Doris Voetsch went to bottled water about the same time.

"Two of my daughters, plus my wife, have thyroid problems requiring daily medication, and I lost my thyroid to cancer in the late '80s," said Greg Voetsch, who has lived in the same Rancho Cordova home since 1970.

Voetsch said he's reluctant to blame the water for his family's ailments.

"I don't know any different. All I know is what is happening to us," he said.

While high levels of perchlorate impair the thyroid gland, scientists are struggling to determine any effect from drinking minute amounts of the chemical over a period of years.

In 1998, the EPA proposed a standard that allows no more than 32 parts per billion perchlorate in drinking water. California health officials set an "action level" at 18 ppb, the point where the state advises that the water source be closely monitored. The state recommends, but does not require, shutting off the contaminated

source at 40 ppb.

The Environmental Working Group, in its report scheduled for release next week, said the proposed standard "would leave formula-fed infants exposed to between 7.5 and 2,000 times the safe level of perchlorate in drinking water." It said the perchlorate level should be set at 4.3 ppb.

EPA officials said they could not comment on the recommendation until they have received and studied the report.

Thomas Zoeller, a University of Massachusetts biology professor tapped to review the proposed standard, said the group makes a scientifically valid case.

Zoeller said the EPA's risk assessment does not consider the possibility infants and fetuses may be more sensitive to reductions in thyroid hormones caused by perchlorate contamination.

"Small, subtle changes in thyroid hormone levels in pregnant woman can predispose their children to measureable and permanent reductions in IQ and to Attention Deficit Disorder," Zoeller said.

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Thyroid Toxin Taints Water Supplies for Millions in Calif. & Nationwide -  
Air Force, Defense Firms Lobby Against Standards for Rocket Fuel Waste

OAKLAND, Calif., July 16 - Sources of drinking water for more than 7 million Californians and unknown millions of other Americans are contaminated with a chemical that disrupts child development and may cause thyroid cancer, but is unregulated by the state or federal government, according to an investigation by Environmental Working Group (EWG).

Today EWG released "Rocket Science: Perchlorate and the Toxic Legacy of the Cold War," available at [www.ewg.org](http://www.ewg.org). Perchlorate, the explosive main ingredient of missile and rocket fuel, has been detected in 58 California public water systems and in water or soil in 17 other states.

Citing EWG's study, The Sacramento Bee reported in a front-page story July 14 that the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency estimates 20 million people in California, Arizona and Nevada have some level of perchlorate, often undetectable, in their drinking water supplies.

([http://www.sacbee.com/news/news/local02\\_20010714.html](http://www.sacbee.com/news/news/local02_20010714.html))

But only a fraction of the water supplies in California or elsewhere have been tested, and the EPA believes perchlorate contaminates water wherever rocket fuel or rockets were made or tested - 39 states in all. "Rocket Science" makes public for the first time maps and databases of all known and suspected perchlorate contamination nationwide.

"We know the water supplies of millions of Californians are contaminated with perchlorate at potentially harmful levels," said Bill Walker, EWG's California director. "But that's just the tip of the iceberg. There are hundreds of untested wells and water systems across the country, and many Americans may be consuming a toxin which is a health threat at very low doses, especially to infants and children."

Too much perchlorate can damage the thyroid gland, which controls growth, development and metabolism. Fetuses, infants and children with thyroid damage may suffer mental retardation, loss of hearing and speech, or deficits in motor skills. At higher levels of exposure, perchlorate is known to cause cancer.

Neither California nor the EPA has established any safety standards for perchlorate in drinking water. The EPA is scheduled to begin nationwide water sampling this year, but it will be years before there are enforceable state or federal drinking water standards.

But it's unlikely that those standards will protect the public, particularly children. EWG calculates that the EPA's latest proposed standard would leave formula-fed infants exposed to between 7.5 and 2,000 times the safe level of perchlorate in drinking water.

EWG's recommendations for a perchlorate standard that will protect children were reviewed by Dr. Thomas Zoeller of the University of Massachusetts, an external peer reviewer of the EPA's proposed perchlorate regulations. Zoeller told The Bee that EWG "makes a scientifically valid case." He agreed with EWG's main finding: The EPA's risk assessment does not consider the possibility that infants and fetuses may be more sensitive to reductions in thyroid hormones caused by perchlorate contamination.

"Small, subtle changes in thyroid hormone levels in pregnant woman can predispose their children to measureable and permanent reductions in IQ and to Attention Deficit Disorder," Zoeller said.

But concerted pressure to set a looser perchlorate standard is coming from a powerful alliance of chemical companies, aerospace contractors and the U.S. Air Force. In an unethical attempt to prove perchlorate is safe, the Air Force is co-sponsoring tests in which human subjects are paid to swallow daily doses of perchlorate much higher than the levels currently recommended by EPA or California.

"In the name of national security the military created a widespread public health threat. Now they're trying to block safety standards that would protect people from that threat," said Walker. "It's clearly not in the public interest for the Air Force to be lobbying against EPA's efforts to set safety standards."

If standards are kept lax, the defense contractors responsible for perchlorate contamination will save millions of dollars in cleanup costs. Some contractors have already cut deals with the Air Force that will stick taxpayers with almost 90 percent of the cleanup bill. With cleanup of heavily contaminated sites estimated to take more than 200 years, the cost to taxpayers may reach billions of dollars.

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The Sacramento Bee, July 14

July 16, 2001

Las Vegas Review-Journal

# Group warns of drinking water risk to babies

*Perchlorate in valley water supply called danger to bottle-fed infants*

By MICHAEL WEISSENSTEIN

A Washington, D.C.-based environmental organization claims in a report released today that the health of area babies could be at risk from perchlorate in the valley's drinking water.

The Environmental Working Group's survey of water supplies contaminated by the rocket fuel oxidizer, which pollutes a shallow aquifer near the Las Vegas Wash, asserts that drinking water should contain no more than 4.3 parts per billion.

Perchlorate is present in the Las Vegas Valley's treated supplies at slightly more than 8 parts per billion, according to tests performed late last month. The contaminant seeped into groundwater from unlined industrial waste pits. A task force is cleaning up the wash contamination.

Environmental Protection Agency regulators are considering a national standard of 32 parts per billion. Environmental Working Group California Director Bill Walker said Friday that standard fails to consider water consumption by bottle-fed babies, who consume water at relatively higher rates than adults.

"There is plenty of evidence that some people in Las Vegas are drinking levels of perchlorate in excess of what scientific studies, and the EPA's provisional recommendation, when corrected for children, show is safe," Walker said.

A Southern Nevada Water Authority spokesman said the agency, which filters much of Las Vegas' drinking water, defers to the EPA.

"If the EPA takes this report into consideration and chooses to select a threshold for perchlorate that is different than the one that they're proposing right now, we're going to comply with whatever that limit is," spokesman J.C. Davis said.



## Excess of volunteers delays research on perchlorate

By Mary Manning

Publicity surrounding a study on human volunteers to test the effects of perchlorate on the thyroid has delayed the start of the research.

So many people volunteered to swallow a pill containing the potentially toxic rocket fuel booster that researchers at California's Loma Linda Medical Center have delayed the study up to a year.

The medical center asked for 100 volunteers, half to receive a perchlorate-laced pill, the other half to get a placebo. Each volunteer was offered \$1,000 to participate.

The \$1.75 million experiment was designed to determine if the pollutant, found in drinking water supplies in Las Vegas and California and 17 other states, interferes with thyroid gland activity. The results could influence how national and state drinking water standards are set.

The study, funded by defense contractor Lockheed Martin, is considered the first large-scale study to use human volunteers to test a water pollutant.

So many people volunteered to take the pills, that officials said they decided to delay the study until the publicity died down. The experimental dose is 83 times more than a person would receive from drinking lake or river water.

The medical center's Institutional Review Board "judged that those people may have been unduly influenced by the remuneration," Barry Taylor, vice president for research affairs at Loma Linda, said. "The remuneration schedule was revised and enrollment suspended until the media interest subsided."

Perchlorate was discovered in Lake Mead, Southern Nevada's major source of drinking water, and in the river downstream in 1998. Rocket fuels are produced at plants in Henderson.

The fact that military contractors are trying to prove there is no harm in drinking perchlorate-contaminated water could present a conflict, a study released today by the Environmental Working Group concluded.

The group alleges that lax safety standards could save defense contractors millions of dollars in cleanup costs. It said contractors already have made deals with the Air Force that will leave taxpayers picking up 90 percent of the costs. In Security and Exchange Commission documents, Lockheed said it is "coordinating with the U.S. Air Force" in further studies of perchlorate.

About 800 residents in Redlands, Calif., sued Lockheed Martin in 1996, claiming their drinking water had

been contaminated

by a closed aerospace plant there. Three of the plaintiffs have died of leukemia and other cancers. The trial is set for next year.

Perchlorate, a salt, can slow thyroid gland activity, potentially interfering with growth in babies and young children. In the

1950s doctors treated patients with over-active thyroids by giving them perchlorate.

Group claims water of 7 million Californians contaminated by rocket fuel

Associated Press  
July 16, 2001

SAN FRANCISCO - The tap water of at least 7 million Californians is contaminated with a chemical from rocket fuel, a problem that affects people in at least 17 other states, according to an environmental group's study.

After collecting data from the federal and local governments, the Environmental Working Group has found that perchlorate, a chemical that affects the thyroid, has tainted wells and river water that feeds California, and contends that suggested acceptable levels are far above where they should be.

The group suggests an enforceable limit on the amount of perchlorate allowed in water. Currently, the Environmental Protection Agency has an advisory level of 4 parts to 18 parts per billion, and the group suggests a 4.3 parts per billion limit. California has a level that recommends that a water source be closely monitored if the perchlorate level reaches 18 parts per billion.

Too much perchlorate can damage the thyroid gland, which controls growth, development and metabolism. Fetuses and children with damage to their thyroids could suffer retardation, hearing or speech loss and motor skill problems. The chemical also can cause cancer at high levels.

Perchlorate is a salt made of ammonia and chlorine that is one of the explosive components of rocket fuel. It affects areas where rocket construction or testing have taken place.

Because there is no set regulatory level, the EPA decides on a case-by-case basis what the acceptable level of cleanup should be, according to Kevin Mayer, regional perchlorate coordinator.

While at least 7 million Californians could be affected by perchlorate, the number of people around the country who could be affected is unknown because little testing has been done, the environmental group said.

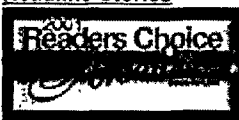
The chemical has been measured in the Colorado River and Lake Mead; in Phoenix, Tucson and other areas in Arizona; as well as cities in

Indiana, Iowa and Kansas.

Perchlorate can be cleaned up using bacteria that use the chemical to breathe when there's no oxygen in the water, by using a resin designed to absorb the salts, or by using ions to take out charged particles. A type of filter also can be used to filter out the molecules.

But the treatments are expensive, and the environmental group estimated that just a part of cleanup at one California site could cost \$50 million and last more than 200 years.

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## 'Group calls for tighter perchlorate regulations

July 17, 2001

ANDREW SILVA

A rocket fuel additive that has contaminated water in Redlands, San Bernardino and other county areas is a potential problem for 7 million Californians and should be more tightly regulated, according to a report by an environmental group.

The Oakland-based Environmental Working Group studied government reports on perchlorate and summarized the data in a report called "Rocket Science: Perchlorate and the Toxic Legacy of the Cold War."

Perchlorate has been a particular problem in San Bernardino County, where a former rocket fuel plant in Mentone owned by aerospace giant Lockheed Martin is thought to be responsible for a plume of contamination threatening wells serving Redlands, Loma Linda and Riverside.

The contamination triggered a lawsuit by 800 people who believe their health problems are caused by the chemical. The case could go to trial next year. Perchlorate, a salt used as an oxidizer in rocket propellant, can cause thyroid problems.

"We know the water supplies of millions of Californians are contaminated with perchlorate at potentially harmful levels," said Bill Walker, Environmental Working Group's California director. "But that's just the tip of the iceberg. There are hundreds of untested wells and water systems across the country, and many Americans may be consuming a toxin which is a health threat at very low doses, especially to infants and children."

More than 40 wells in the San Bernardino area have been found to be contaminated. There is no enforceable state or federal standard for safe levels in water.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is pursuing a standard, but research is still not complete. An enforceable standard is still years away.

The EPA, in a scientific review meeting two years ago in San

Bernardino, discussed 32 parts per billion as a safe level for adults. But some researchers continued to be worried about effects on children, infants and fetuses.

The state uses an interim level of 18 parts per billion.

One of the EPA's lead researchers said much research has been done in the past two years, and a new proposed safe exposure level will be ready for review by outside scientists next spring.

"We were the first to raise those concerns" about effects on children at nursing infants, said Annie Jarabek, project leader for the EPA's perchlorate studies. "New studies address those concerns in greater detail."

The Environmental Working Group report argues the standard should be set no higher than 4 parts per billion. A drop of water in an Olympic-size swimming pool is about 1 part per billion.

The EPA has required some contaminated areas, including a Superfund site in the San Gabriel Valley, to be cleaned to 4 parts per billion. Jarabek declined to say if the proposed safe level would be lower than 32 parts per billion.

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## Plan will take 240 years to clean up Superfund site contaminated by rocket fuel

Monday, July 30, 2001

[Breaking News Sections](#)

DON THOMPSON, Associated Press Writer

(07-30) 19:18 PDT SACRAMENTO, Calif.  
(AP) --

It will take 240 years and \$111 million to clean up groundwater at a Superfund site contaminated with rocket fuel, the federal Environmental Protection Agency said Monday.

Nine wells near the 8,500-acre Aerojet Superfund site contain undrinkable water, and the EPA estimated 13 more could be lost over the next 25 years unless the chemical is contained. The site is in Rancho Cordova, just east of Sacramento.

Along with other chemicals, the groundwater has very high levels of perchlorate. The chemical can damage the thyroid gland, which controls growth, development and metabolism. Perchlorate can also cause cancer at high levels.

The EPA's plan includes pumping out the contaminated groundwater, treating it, then using it or releasing it into the American River or its tributaries. The goal is to reduce the concentration from its current 8,000 parts per billion to four parts per billion, the lowest measurable level.

The Environmental Working Group, a public-interest research organization, estimated recently that the drinking water of at least 7 million Californians is contaminated with perchlorate, as is the water for residents in at least 17 other states.

The chemical has been measured in the Colorado River and Lake Mead; in Phoenix,

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Tucson and other areas in Arizona; as well as cities in Indiana, Iowa and Kansas.

Aerojet and its subsidiaries have manufactured rocket engines since 1953, releasing what the EPA said are unknown amounts of hazardous chemicals into the ground. The area was declared a Superfund site in 1983.

On the Net:

[www.ewg.org](http://www.ewg.org)

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